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Tempo

Defector

Loving dear Russia, loathing its system

By Robert Cross

During an extremely brief stroll on Michigan Avenue a while back, Arkady Nikolaevich Shevchenko was approached by an elderly woman who wanted to whisper a few words of praise. As she spoke, a blush spread from the base of Shevchenko's suntanned chin to the roots of his flawless white hair. Moments later, a young man grabbed Shevchenko's hand and said, "Thank you for giving us so much insight." Shevchenko responded with a tight, embarrassed smile.

Although it's discomfiting, recognition from strangers no longer surprises the 54-year-old Soviet defector. The media have made Shevchenko a genuine celebrity, starring him in a long-running series that might be called "Ask Arkady."

Lately, of course, the questions they ask concern the death of Premier Konstantin U. Chernenko and the sudden elevation of Mikhail Gorbachev to general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. As usual, Shevchenko can provide detailed analysis.

Our understanding of the Kremlin was considerably more limited before the 1978 defection of Shevchenko, former undersecretary general of the United Nations and political adviser to Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko. In February, Shevchenko disclosed that he had served as a reluctant spy for the U.S. government during a 2½-year stretch before his defection became public. While still holding his job at the United Nations, he reported regularly to U.S. State Department officials, who made him play a dangerous game of "Ask Arkady" in a secret meeting place just blocks away from the KGB-infested Soviet Mission in Manhattan.

Shevchenko had routine access to cables, memos and meetings in the upper levels of the Soviet foreign service. His close relations with Gromyko made him familiar with the machinations of the Politburo.

He said he was a reluctant spy during those years, but once he had approached U.S. officials with his request for asylum, the game had to be played according to their rules. They wanted him as an insider as long as possible. He realized "the Americans could prove to the Soviets that I was a traitor. They could blackmail me. I knew that the world of espionage had its own rules and suspected that the KGB had no exclusive claim on ruthlessness. I realized I was trapped."

That was almost a decade ago. Shevchenko's face now turns up regularly on television news, at congressional hearings and on the lecture circuit. It is a large, impassive face, attached, it turns out, to a short and somewhat round-shouldered body, perfectly formed for bending to whisper confidences or to offer noncommittal shrugs. Although his slight physique looks like a muted plea for diplomatic immunity, Shevchenko insists on strolling American streets with little protection. Spies and defectors before him often have changed their identities and taken permanent flight from the wrath of Soviet operatives. Shevchenko, however, relishes freedom and says a life spent in hiding would mitigate the reasons he left his homeland.

During his stroll down Michigan Avenue, a hired chauffeur sat in the car and watched him from a distance. Federal Bureau of Investigation agents in Chicago knew every moment of his schedule. But freely walking in the sunshine on an American street is part of the reward Shevchenko demands for the risks he has taken, and he will have nothing to do with disguises or bodyguards.

"I don't think the Soviets would do something to me because it's simply not worthwhile from their point of view," he said. "What is my life worth, compared to the scandal that would occur if they did something to me now? My face is so well known in this country.

"The Soviets, of course, are mad at me. They shouldn't be because the portraits of the Soviet leaders which I made are objective. I'm against the Soviet system. I was forced out of my country because of that system. But all the portraits of the leaders of the Soviet Union—Andrei Gromyko, Mikhail Gorbachev, all the rest—are the truth."

Those portraits became available to the public in February when Alfred A. Knopf Inc. released Shevchenko's memoir, "Breaking with Moscow," a detailed report on the inner workings of the Soviet system and the officials who run it. Some of those officials, particularly Gromyko and Gorbachev, the author treats with warmth and respect.

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Naturally, some observers might wonder if someone who had lived a lie for so long can be trusted. Conor Cruise O'Brien, a former Irish delegate to the UN, recently wrote in the New York Review of Books, "It seemed to me that if Mr. Shevchenko's contacts in the American intelligence community wanted him to put things into his book that didn't actually happen, he was hardly in a position to resist their demands." But O'Brien said the book finally proved convincing to him. "If there are items of disinformation in it," O'Brien wrote, "they have been skillfully planted."

Shevchenko and Gorbachev are 54 and relatively young by the standards of traditional Soviet codgerocracy. Gorbachev represents a victory for the generation to which Shevchenko belongs and a break from the stodgy and ill-informed system he fled.

The defector describes himself as a former dreamy-eyed youth who truly believed Marxist-Leninist ideology would prevail in Russia and around the world for the greater good of mankind. Instead, he found his leaders engaged in a cynical quest for personal power and material goods. Leaders promised a prosperity that never came and acted dangerously erratic in their views on foreign affairs.

"When I was a student, we'd be asking, 'When will we win? What year?' " Shevchenko said. And after he became a prominent member of the foreign relations staff, he realized the caretakers of his ideals were creaky, self-serving, isolated cynics. He said he considered breaking with his government as early as 1970.

"These old leaders were decayed and absolutely out of touch with reality," he said the other day. "What they see going on in the country they see only in paper reports or compilations of paper reports, something which has already been crystalized and screened."

He had looked in vain for heroes. "I cried at Joseph Stalin's funeral," he said. "I thought he was good for us, the great president of eastern Europe." Then Nikita Khrushchev came into power and revealed the atrocities of the Stalin era. Shevchenko, shocked, said he then pinned his hopes on Khrushchev as the leader who would make Russia a responsible world citizen.

But on the eve of a promising Paris summit conference in 1960, Khrushchev chose to make a major incident out of the U-2 spy plane captured on Russian soil. The summit was abandoned, along with all the carefully worded peace proposals that had been prepared by Shevchenko and his colleagues.

"Khrushchev was a very serious disillusionment for me," he said. As general undersecretary of the United Nations, Shevchenko kept up the pretense that he was responsible only to the UN, as that body's charter stipulates, but his orders from home took precedence: Push the Soviet cause at every opportunity. Aid and abet the spies appointed to his staff. Cooperate with the KGB. Shevchenko said he could see no end to the lies he had to live, and he could find no heroes among the men who succeeded Khrushchev. The one man he might have respected rose to power long after Shevchenko chose to make a new life in the U.S.

He met Mikhail Gorbachev in 1977, when Shevchenko and his wife, Lina, were vacationing in a spa reserved for government elite. Gorbachev in those days was the first secretary of the Territorial Party Committee in Stavropol in Caucasia, which includes the resort city of Kislovodsk. While taking the mineral waters and browsing in the shops, Shevchenko heard glowing reports about the local chief.

"He was liked by the people of Stavropol," Shevchenko said. "At that time, Gorbachev was not so important that people would not dare to say something critical about him. The nurses in the resort, the people in the town, all said they had a good man as the party leader in their region. 'He is dynamic,' they said. 'He's receiving people, devoting time every week to meetings with us and hearing our complaints.' Some Soviet leaders do that, but sometimes they do it in a very rude way. He didn't."

Gorbachev also made it a point to meet with the top Kremlin brass who regularly visited the resort for rest and recreation. Most of them were feeble men who would sneak vodka into the tumblers meant to hold their rejuvenative mineral water and who ordinarily were quite brusque with the underlings who surrounded them. Yuri Andropov directed his chauffeur to drive on the jogging paths, scattering terrified bureaucrats. But even Andropov, a most haughty and contemptuous Soviet leader, took a liking to the youthful chief of Stavropol and made him a protege.

"Some people ask how such an ordinary young man and a provincial party boss so quickly made it to Moscow," Shevchenko said. "The answer is simple. Gorbachev talked to the leaders when they came to his region for medical treatment. And he was noticed by the top leadership as a man of ability, as a person who has a future."

In "Breaking with Moscow," Shevchenko repeatedly demonstrates a fondness for Russia that at times almost overrides his loathing for the system. His defection cost him major chunks of his life. The privileges he enjoyed as a high-level Soviet bureaucrat would be hard to duplicate in the U.S. on his income of academic stipends, book royalties and consulting fees.

He lost far more than just comfort, however. During his years of secret spying for the U.S., he could never bring himself to reveal his intentions to his family. Lina disliked almost everything about America except the shopping sprees, and he was afraid she might get him into trouble with the Soviets. Shortly after Shevchenko asked publicly for asylum, the KGB whisked Lina back to Moscow. She reportedly committed suicide there, although Shevchenko believes KGB agents killed her. His daughter, Anna, a student, and his son, Gennady, an aspiring career diplomat, remain in Moscow. Shevchenko said he hasn't been able to communicate with them.

When his life in the U.S. grew unbearably lonely, Shevchenko hired a woman from an escort service and became deeply attached to her. That led to further pain when the woman, Judy Chavez, exploited the relationship by writing "Defector's Mistress: The Judy Chavez Story," which portrayed Shevchenko as a pathetic, affection-starved wretch. Shevchenko considered suing, but decided that would only prolong

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the scandal. He has since married a former court stenographer, Elaine, and they live in the Washington area.

His suffering during those first years as a Soviet "traitor" raises a hypothetical question. If he had known that a relatively youthful, sophisticated and dynamic person such as Gorbachev was about to reach the pinnacle of Soviet power, would he then have stayed in his beloved Russia?

"No, I don't think so," he said. "He belongs to my generation, and he is an intelligent, able and talented man. He has much more understanding of the real problems of the Soviet economy. But there is another side to Gorbachev. He is truly a product of the Soviet apparatus. I have no doubt whatsoever that he has absolute devotion to the Soviet system. Everyone is happy to see in the Kremlin, as a top leader, someone who is not an invalid, like Leonid Brezhnev in his last two years, or Andropov or Chernenko. But don't forget, Gorbachev is not so young, actually. He's a man in his 50s who spent all his life as a party man with a devotion to the goals of the party."

Shevchenko said he has a different goal, which he can best accomplish by answering, honestly, all the questions America will continue to ask him. He states the goal eloquently in his memoir.

"What I want is to share . . . my experiences under the Soviet system; to tell the truth about it as I lived it; to inform the public of Soviet designs, and to warn of the dangers they present to the world. In so doing I hope also, in however small a way, to help the Soviet people eventually find their way to liberty."